

# The Lebanese Heritage House:

## Marie Khalife's Museum

By Dr. Guita Hourani<sup>1</sup> and Michel Ghanem

Perched on a hill overlooking the ancient church of Our Lady of Ilige and the Monastery of Mayfouq in Mayfouq, Lebanon, we find one of Lebanon's hidden national treasures: "the Lebanese Heritage House" of the late Marie Khalife. Over a period of more than 30 years, Khalife amassed hundreds of cultural objects from around Lebanon to create a replica of the characteristic



Lebanese home. Her villa and the museum it housed were finished in 1990, at which point she opened it for free to the public. Although it was not an official museum, and it was largely unadvertised, it was visited by over 3000 persons by the time she died, in March 2013. Partly

this was due to the fact that the Lebanese Heritage House had caught the attention of the media, and was featured on many Lebanese and Middle Eastern TV shows.

Marie held BAs in Arabic literature and theology and taught painting as well as civic education in private and public schools in Lebanon, instilling into generations of students a love for Lebanon and its heritage. She was a poet and a painter, and friends and acquaintances can testify to her refinement. In the era of the Civil wars, when all about her intellectuals as well as common people were falling victim to pessimism about the future of Lebanon, she resisted with

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passion this notion and maintained a resilient optimism. She persisted in nurturing her vision of beauty, seeing life in naturally formed objects and giving them, as well as products of handicraft, a home. Objects for her were subjects that told stories.

Her Mayfouq villa cultural artifacts documents- a rich valuable learning Lebanese culture. her museum to generations and people aware of texture of economics, art. To Marie, were themselves of the lives of passed before us; clues for earlier way of unconscious bygone

Artifacts that from modern life Khalife's *Jaoura* (The rare item that who are likely to



is a repository of – objects and untapped lode of experiences in Khalife wanted educate to make young the infinitely rich Lebanese history, cultural life and these objects the story tellers people who have they provide understanding life; they are the signature of a civilization.

have disappeared found a harbor in museum. *Al Screamer*) is a fascinates visitors be unacquainted

with this kind of object. It is formed of the upper part of a pottery jar covered by a piece of animal skin from which a waxed string dangles. The string is played on to emit a sound that resonates in the jar and echoes with the sound of a wild dog. The instrument was used to scare wild animals, especially hyenas.

*Al Kwara* (Container) is made of bamboo covered with a mixture of hay and white plaster to hold grains so as not to be eaten by mice; it has an opening at the lower side that can be stopped up with a piece of wood, which can then be removed in order to pour out the grains.



***The Khawabi (Jars) in the Lebanese Heritage House***



***The Kwara in the Lebanese Heritage House***

*Al Jaroucheh* (The Grinding Stone) is a manual grinding mill formed of two superimposed stones with a handle in the middle that is turned to crush the grains.

Khalife modeled the stone and wood interior of her museum to resemble a traditional Lebanese stone house. She also made the seats from stones, draped them with handmade rugs that reused old clothes of various colors, and put down embroidered cushions to make sitting more comfortable. Everything in the museum was collected by either Khalife or was donated to her by villagers who appreciated her passion for antiques.



Khalife's interest in her Lebanese heritage expressed itself in this project of saving and displaying remnants of a material life that had passed, preserving at least something of it from oblivion. Present-day Lebanese have evolved many rituals to evoke their past. They publish and read memoirs, revisit the deserted abodes once inhabited by their ancestors, or, as in Marie Khalife's case, engage in acts of re-building and preservation. However, not many have gone so far in reconstructing the traditional house and stocking it with every possible item and architectural aspect as it was shaped by generations of Lebanese villagers, creating, in the process, a witness to bygone ways of living.

Needless to say, Khalife was a devoted patriot, taking enormous pride in contributing a small monument to a life as it was lived in

the past, not by kings or warriors, but by ordinary people. Accumulating various items over the years, and have those match and cohabit with several others, from different places around Lebanon, Khalife realized in detail her vision of the traditional house in her native village.

The house she built is really a museum disguised as a house, conjuring up memory and giving body to its visitor's imagination of the past. The museum is not only a place that illustrates the information it offers, but it is meant to make the visitor dream to some extent. Here the Lebanese Heritage House evidently succeeds, on the witness of its visitors.



The interior of the Lebanese Heritage House in Mayfouq, Lebanon



The exterior of the Lebanese Heritage House in Mayfouq, Lebanon

The younger generations who have not seen the house of their grandfathers will find in Marie's museum the aspects of both harmony and practicality. They will learn how scarcity could be overcome with ingenuity, creating multifunctional and simple spaces and objects.

The Lebanese house of the past was tucked into the landscape it did not so much dominate as collaborate with. The house absorbed the land's curves and formations, in the process using the soil, the rocks, the wood, and the strong arms of men and women. Such houses, where every little detail counts, came to be bathed in an atmosphere of intimacy and comfort. Every item was handmade carefully, and the total design was oriented towards keeping a balance between aesthetics and functionality, such as the flow of light into the house, the height of the walls, the supporting beams, the furniture and the few pieces of decoration.



The Lebanese Heritage House in Mayfouk is well worth the trip. It is not only a glimpse of the past, but a witness to one woman's noble passion for the silent sweep of Lebanese history, in the face of some of the most difficult moments in that history. The House was not closed after Marie Khalife died. It is open for visitors by appointment only and mostly during the summer months of July and August. As for directions: the visitor need merely go to Mayfouq and ask any of the villagers how to get to Marie Khalife's house.